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Title

Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference Held at the University of Zaragoza, 30 Sept.-1 Oct. 2005. Edited by Richard L. Gordon and Franciscó Marco Simón. (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World.) Leiden: Brill, 2009....

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2vm547pm>

Journal

Numen, 59(4)

ISSN

0029-5973

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.1163/156852712x641813

Peer reviewed

Review of *Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30Sept-1Oct 2005* Brill

This hefty and rewarding volume brings us the good news: the Latin-speaking West offers scholars a gold mine of material remains from diverse rituals aimed at pleading with, asking politely, legally binding and threatening all sorts of supernatural figures for all sorts of very human ends. Unfortunately the theoretical frameworks for analyzing these remains are marred by lingering remains of Victorian evolutionary models ranging from lingering notions of “primitive” pagan and Jewish rituals to compulsive magic as a precursor of proper Protestant religion (magic as a cheaper, more convenient, more vulgarized version of religion). Given the size of the volume, I will outline the range of materials discussed and the types of questions they raise.

The volume opens auspiciously with James Rives’ meticulous review of the uses of the term “magus.” He traces its complex development from a narrow focus on a distinct type of religious practitioner to the “broad range of associations” found in an author such as Pliny. Poetic usage may turn out to be exotic (p. 74), a valuable demonstration of how phrases shift nuance as they move from genre to genre.

The subsequent chapter, Matthew Dickie’s survey of Latin historians attitudes towards magic, is less convincing since it is not always clear what exact is being mapped. Tacitus has what appears to be a totally strategic definition of magic as basically disapproved religion. Lucian does not believe in magic but it is not clear what he *does* believe in and therefore what exactly he is rejecting. For Dio Cassius, Hadrian’s interest in magic was one aspect of a generally lurid personality. To what extant is Dickie talking about the same thing as the ancient authors, especially when what he is mapping is their *lack* of use of a set of terms?

In “Heretical Texts and *maleficium* in the *Codex Theodosianus*,” Maria Victoria Escribano Pano demonstrates neatly the tight connection between charges of heresy and of magic. Heresy charges emerge as the church expands its authority over practitioners who did not think their form of Christianity problematic. So too the contours of charges of magic change as various types of rituals gain or lose clear standing as part of an authoritative religious structure. Pano’s fascinating question about the status of the codex as an especially powerful object

merits more attention. Her use of the term “performative” is one of many in the volume that needs a better grounding in meta-linguistics .

Blånsdorf’s paper (The *defixiones* from the Sanctuary of Isis and Mater Magna in Mainz) examines “defixiones” from a joint sanctuary of Isis and Magna Mater, the later deity worshiped in the north-western provinces early than previously thought and appearing with Attis in curse-texts and cursing defixiones. The article reiterates the categorization by Eric Turner of these as examples of as a “prayer (plea) for justice” , greatly expanded on by H. S. Versnel. The full range of literary and material evidence is needed in order to understand the role of Magna Mater, a point made decades ago about Isis by Jonathan Z. Smith . This will now be possible given the new discoveries.

The first inscriptions from Rome to mention Anna Perenna, whose identity was already the source of many different theories in Ovid, are the subjects of the next paper by Marina Piranomonet (Religion and Magic at Rome: The Fountain of Anna Perenna). The inscriptions mentioning Anna Perenna along with her nymphs were found along with evidence of cultic practices (pine cones, egg shells, oil lamps, and numerous defixiones). Poppets (poorly-made, miniature statues) are used to represent humans towards whom supernatural action is directed. In other cultic settings poppets, usually more carefully constructed, were used to represent deities. The question remains, what is it about the nature of these rites that necessitate this specific use of anthropomorphic images? The rituals show tremendous continuity between pagan and Christian practice so this question is central to a late antique religious expression in general. In a related paper on the texts from the fountain, Blånsdorf interprets the rites as variations on sacrifices, a suggestive theory.

Roger Tomlin’s paper, “Cursing a Thief in Iberia and Britain,” very convincingly outlines the bureaucratic view of some interactions with gods found in six Iberian curses of thieves, perhaps a mundane set of images for divine relationships but one that must have been appealing to those in search of justice. Six Iberian curses of thieves mirror some of the same language found in parallel British texts. Here the gods are treated as if they are superior Roman officials, an optimistic thought or a statement about the remote nature of Roman government.

H. S. Versnel’s paper develops a taxonomy distinguishing prayers for justice (flattering supplications by someone who has been harmed for the gods to punish the wrong-doers) from “‘binding’ *defixiones*” (intended to neutralize competitors’ ability to worse the principal). The next step is to connect these distinct strategies with social context. Is flattery used to distinguish between magic and religion or because it is

the mode of discourse that matches with the social perception of the divine being addressed and what makes for a successful interaction? The social setting is not obvious; in some cultures, the most deferential language enacts the strongest demands.

The specific settings of so many material items are lost due to the way they were first uncovered and collected. Not so for a set of defixiones against the Roman government found in north-eastern Spain and discussed by Francisco Simon in "Execrating Roman Power." These lead plaques with members of the Roman administration as the targets can be both dated (between 75-85) and connected with some very specific disputes over land ownership. This fascinating find also helps us understand motivations for the rites; secrecy is needed not because of some abstract aspect of magic but because they only worked if the plaques are not found. The necessarily hidden nature of some rituals is also discussed in Neito's paper "A Visigothic Charm from Asturias."

Yebeles' fascinating study of stones used in navigation, "Magic at Sea," outlines the consecration of the stones, familiar from van Genep's "pivoting of the sacred." The stones were used to align natural and divine forces. In order to understand these rituals we need both a better understanding of how "natural forces" were conceived (something Pliny had much to say about) and also the question of how different types of forces were thought to interact.

Richard Gordon, who has written some of the most sophisticated theorizing about definitions of magic and religion, looks specifically for evidence of a genealogical relationship between the new material evidence and the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri. This very careful article does not downplay the complexity of proving direct lines of influence. Sub-categories of types of rituals such as "prayers for justice" are outlined, are both more interesting and have greater explanatory value and general connections between collections of rituals. As always, Gordon's article is full of rich commentary, including his discussion of local versus more empire-wide traditions. For something to be standardized, some form of authority is needed and both local and far-off powers flexed their muscles around religious expressions.

Jaime Ezquerra's no doubt correct rejection of the "Mithris Liturgy" as "mithraic" is a salutary contribution to the volume. The point that the ritual may have been designed as "short cut" versions of other, more expensive and complex initiation rituals is valuable. Every religious institution offers a set of options for meeting specific goals that depend on the finances of the people involved, their social standing etc. The larger question of how these various versions were thought to compete or compliment each other remains open.

Readers, confronted with this wealth of material remains, are free to develop their own interpretations of how these objects were used in the hardscrabble daily life of the ancient inhabitants of the Latin West. The remains point to continuity with past ritual expressions and local holy sites, never a surprise in the study of religion, and to practices shared among neighbors who did not necessarily share religions.

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